

FROM CURSED TO ACCLAIMED

THE *MR. BELLPOND* FILM PROJECT

WRITTEN BY
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PHOTOS COURTESY OF
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"Transporting this short but hilarious story to the screen turned out to be one massive undertaking."

A Geoff Hansen as
Mr. Bellpond
B Director A. Todd
Smith, on set.



In a dusty Victorian parlor, musical genius Mr. Quentin O. Bellpond picks up his pen to write a masterpiece. As he composes, his graying head aches (a bobbing arrow appears near his temples). The floating time stamp at his side counts down the days and minutes he has left until his deadline. Will he finish his play before the month is out? Could the blackmailer be telling the truth? Hope tugs at his cynical heart—after all these years of pain and insecurity, could his wife really be alive?

And so the stage is set for the comical misfortunes of the titular character in A. Todd Smith's short film, *Mr. Bellpond*. The main character, a once-notable playwright and composer, isolates himself in his home after his wife, Yuridia, disappears—until an anonymous letter arrives twenty-three years later. In exchange for information about Yuridia, the letter reads, Mr. Bellpond must compose a masterpiece for his blackmailer. Unfortunately, Mr. Bellpond's creative process is bogged down by absurd physical maladies and the "misbehavior" of his fictional characters.

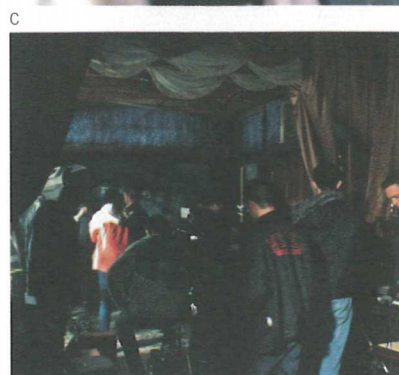
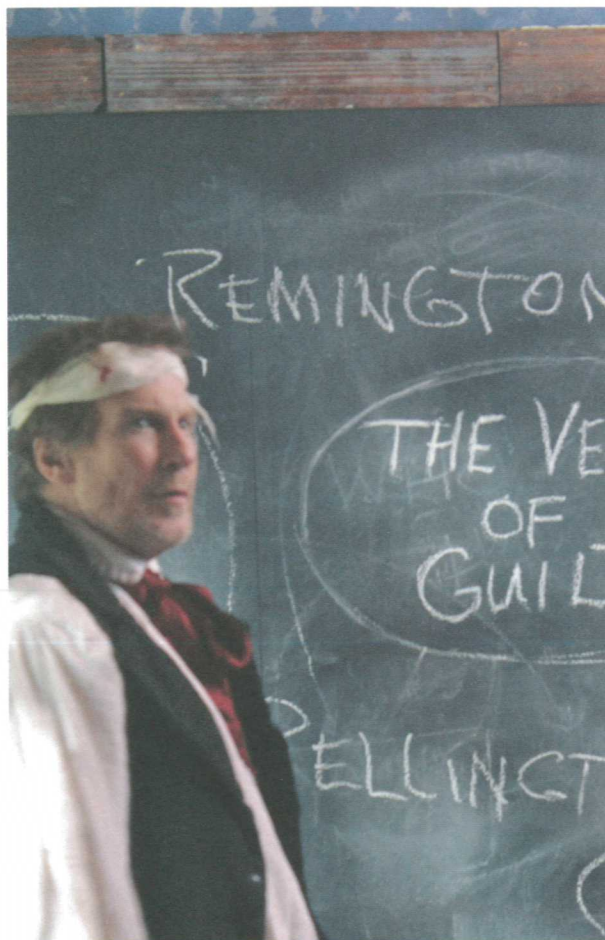
While Mr. Bellpond's misadventures are fun to watch, transporting this short but

hilarious story to the screen turned out to be one massive and hellish undertaking, only made possible by the tremendous commitment and ingenuity of the cast and crew. Three years before the film debuted in spring 2012, A. Todd Smith, a senior in theatre media arts at BYU, had just been informed that he needed to budget, cast, and promote a twelve-minute film in order to graduate. Though this wasn't his first time directing a film, Smith confesses that he was completely unprepared for the ordeal this film turned out to be.

Smith went through several story ideas by different writers, but he couldn't find a story that engaged him. Finally, Tom Russell,

an associate professor of media arts at BYU, gave the frustrated Smith some advice: "You got to write it yourself, man. The reason you aren't connecting to anything... is because you have a unique set of life experiences that many other students haven't lived through." Russell referred to Smith's father taking his own life in 2006. With the help of his then-fiancée, Amy Leah Nelson, Smith drew inspiration from his father's passing to write a film about the paralyzing effects of grief as well the healing effects of humor and hope.

Once the project was cleared by the BYU media arts faculty in November 2010, Smith and his film producer, Bree Evans, sought



C Bellpond brainstorms on his blackboard.
D A behind the scenes look at the Bellpond crew.
E The equipment and crew who pulled it all together.

out a set location. They got permission for an enchanting Victorian home in Ogden. But it had been gutted for renovation, and building contractors would be working during the filming.

Accepting this noise challenge, Smith's team spent all of January 2011 decorating the set, then Smith sent photos of the set to the faculty overseeing the project. The faculty responded that the set was inadequate, and the project was briefly cancelled. To save the film, Smith suggested bringing Amy Leah Nelson, a visual arts major, onto the project to take over set design.

They were given three days to fix the set.

Smith and Nelson quickly pulled together their production crew, and coaxed their mutual friend and media arts studies major, Nick Dixon, onto the project to help redecorate the set. When their small team arrived at the set in Ogden, Dixon was shocked at how stark the inside of the house looked despite the previous month's set dressing. "We didn't have a set," he says. "We had a skeleton."

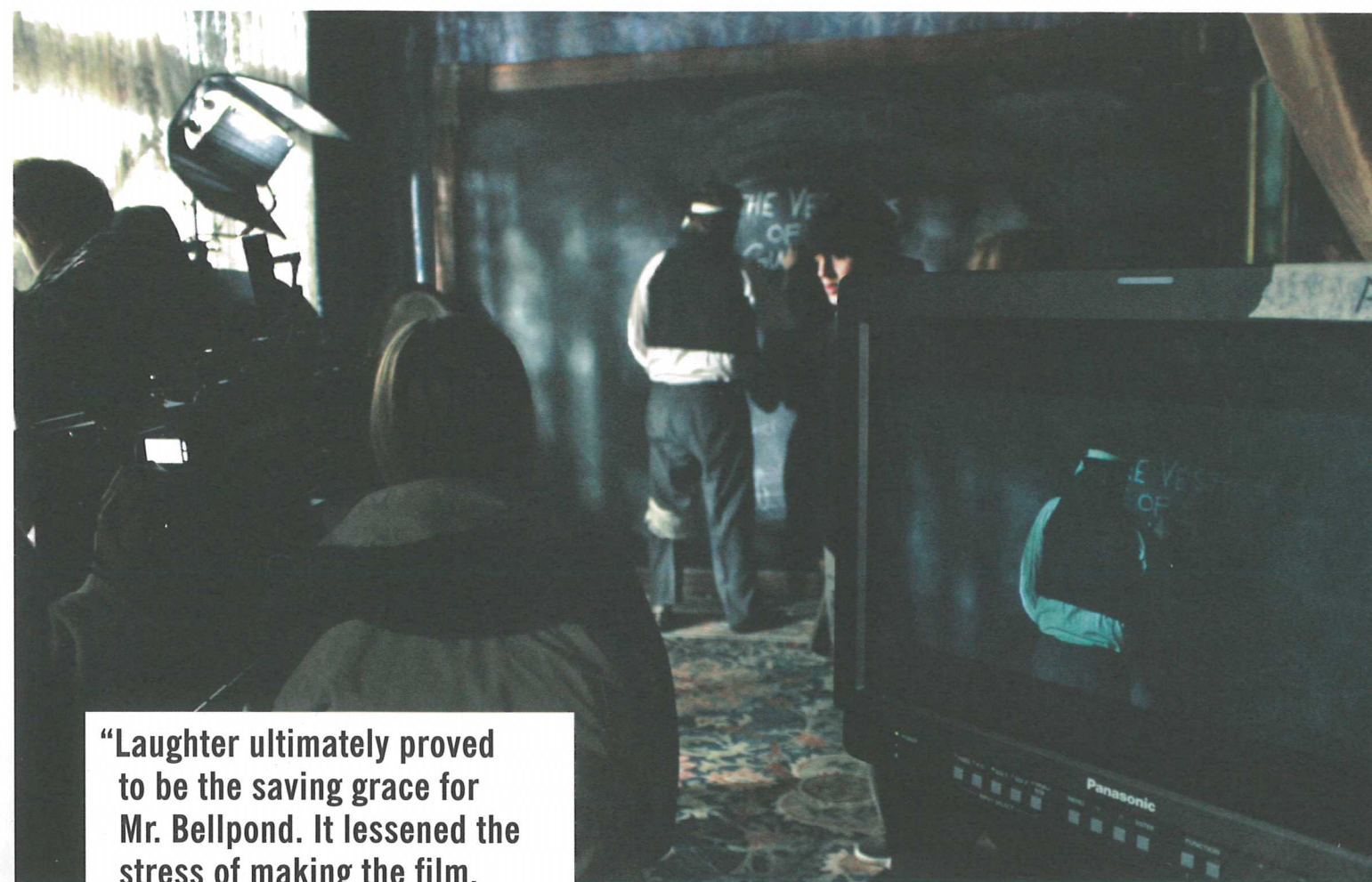
To cover the naked beams, the crew draped them with paper that had been stenciled to look like antique wallpaper. Bookshelves had to be carefully balanced so they wouldn't lean against or break through the paper walls. Nelson worked as a set design fairy godmother, borrowing hundreds of library books to populate the shelves and renting 1800s furniture and props from the BYU prop shop.

The final product, brought together by a volunteer crew and several all-nighters, was phenomenal. "It looked so good," says Dixon. "I never would've guessed we weren't filming in a museum." The faculty agreed.

Production began in April 2011, combining the artistic and technical talents of eighty BYU students. The 160-mile round-trip commute from Provo to the set in Ogden, Utah, gobbled up almost three hours each day for filming. Still, the team got as much as they could from their six production days. On at least two nights, the cast and crew chose to spend the night in Ogden at local crew members' family homes so they could get to work early in the morning.

Smith's tentative goal for *Mr. Bellpond* was to enter the 2012 College Television Awards competition, otherwise known as the student Emmys, a national competition for college students who produce digital, video, and film work. But true to form, the months before the deadline were filled with never-ending complications. During one of their precious production days, the crew was scheduled to film in an office in the Velour Live Music Gallery. They had been forbidden to touch anything in the office; they couldn't even close the blinds to block out light bouncing off passing cars. As the crew mulled over how to deal with the problem of the flashing lights, the cinematographer suggested they pretend the scene was taking place on a train and the lights were from passing scenery. In mock somberness, the actors jiggled back and forth in their seats to imitate the motion of a train. Several of the takes for this scene ended in laughter. "It was a lot of those last-minute decisions that made the film turn out for the better," says Smith.

Laughter ultimately proved to be the saving grace for *Mr. Bellpond*. It lessened the stress of making the film, particularly



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when key players were suddenly called away or left the project entirely. Todd Smith traveled to Cambodia for a previous commitment, and Bree Evans prepared to leave on a mission and needed someone to replace her as producer. Nick Dixon took over, despite having no experience as a producer, and stayed in contact with Smith while learning on the job.

Keeping team members committed to the project proved to be difficult with so many delays and the director a world away. "The thing about working on a student film," says Smith, "is that everyone is working for free, which is a good thing and a bad thing. People who are reliable and come through really rise to the top. Those kinds of people save the day."

By the time Smith returned from Cambodia, the competition deadline was just two weeks away, and a hulking number of unfinished tasks still remained.

Smith and Dixon discovered that all of the "human noises" (e.g. breath-

ing, wheezing, and whimpering) in the otherwise speechless film were muffled by the hammering and sawing of the on-going renovations. So Smith spent twenty-four hours recreating and recording all the sound effects himself. Nelson helped tackle graphics and animation. Dixon took two weeks off his day job so that he and Josh Gibson, another visual arts specialist, could tighten up edits and wipe production errors from the film.

In early 2012, Smith sent in the final product to the College Television Awards—late, rushed, unfinished, and almost ten minutes too long.

A few months later, the film team grinned giddily as Smith and Dixon ascended a lit stage in Hollywood to accept the Best Comedy and Best Directing awards. The film was acclaimed for its originality, production set, and—much to Smith and Dixon's amusement—sound.

Smith and Dixon shared the stage with two other BYU student film teams that night, so with five student-Emmys, BYU managed to sweep the competition in the film-making category. "We're technically not [even] a film school," Dixon says. "So, go Cougars!"

"The student-Emmy awards were certainly an incredible compliment," Smith says, "which validated the hell we went through." But ultimately his deep commitment to the project, which had overcome both the project's first cancellation and his own months-long absence from the film, stemmed from the character whose story he told. "Mr. Bellpond, a character who is so close to my heart . . . relates to me. He relates to my father. And for that reason alone, I could never give up. As a filmmaker, you [say], 'I'm going to do this, no matter what. Even if it turns out terrible, who cares? I'm going to do it anyway.'" ■